IDENTIFYING THE DIVINE IN THE ROMAN NEAR EAST

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In scholarly efforts to identify the multifarious inhabitants of the divine worlds of the Near East in the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, the notion of syncretism has traditionally played (and continues to play) a major part.[1] It is therefore fitting to start this methodological contribution to the debate with what is commonly viewed as the embodiment *par excellence* of the notion of syncretism: the spectacle to be observed on the most conspicuous hilltop in the mountainous kingdom of Commagene. At the summit of Nemrud Dağ, Antiochus I, who ruled his realm from ca 70 to 36 BC, built for himself the ostentatious *hierothesion* of which the remains are still awe-inspiring.[2] The royal tomb sanctuary consisted of three terraces, one of which remained unfinished following the accession to the throne by Antiochus' son Mithradates II. But both the west and the east terrace, though preserved in different degrees, leave no doubt about the appearance of the monumental testimony to the king's slightly megalomaniac vision of the divine world inhabiting his ancestral lands: a series of gigantic statues dominate each terrace, with the likeness of Antiochus himself seated alongside the celestial personification of the Commagenian homeland and a number of other gods, explicitly identified by the inscriptions running on the back of the statues as follows: Zeus Oromasdes, Apollo Mithras Helios Hermes, and Artagnes Heracles Ares. On Nemrud Dağ one hence finds oneself faced with composite deities boasting a divine nomenclature that contains both Greek and Persian elements, mirroring the way the king presents his own dual lineage in the inscriptions. In the case of Apollo Mithras Helios Hermes, the Greek names are obviously more dominant, whereas in the case of Artagnes Heracles Ares it is the Persian ingredient that is listed first, although the one Persian name is followed by two names of Greek gods. The statues themselves are built in a non-Classical style, characterised by their frontality and hieratic pose, though with

[1] I remain very grateful to Corinne Bonnet and Laurent Bricault for inviting me to speak at the conference on Panthée. Les mutations religieuses dans l'empire romain, and for the hospitality in Toulouse. The title originally allocated to me, 'les formes de syncrétisme' (in the session on 'du local à l'universel'), which for rhetorical reasons I replaced halfway through my talk with the present title, has not survived into the written version. I should also thank the other participants for their comments and suggestions.

[2] D.H. Sanders (ed.), *Nemrud Dağı. The Hierothesion of Antiochus I of Commagene* 1-2 (Winona Lake, Ind. 1996). The standard work on Antiochus and the dynasty of which he is the best known representative is M. Facella, *La dinastia degli Orontidi nella Commagene ellenistico-romana* (Pisa 2006). Cf. M.-J. Versluys, *Nemrud Dağ and Commagene under Antiochos I. Material Culture, Identity and Style in the Late Hellenistic World* (Cambridge forthcoming).

Classical requisites such as Heracles' club. The language of the inscriptions, on the other hand, is simply Greek. These uniquely named deities are the same gods with whom the Commagenian king portrayed himself on the multiple *dexiôsis* reliefs which were set up throughout the kingdom. The hand-shakes, however, are given by Antiochus to gods who have materialised in a clearly much more Classical form. But their 'Greek shape' notwithstanding, they remain the same composite deities that were lined up at Nemrud Dağ, as is made clear by the inscriptions (again written only in Greek) that accompany them on the back. The well-known, splendidly preserved image of the classical figure shaking the king's hand at Arsameia on the Nymphaios is therefore not that of Heracles, but of Artagnes Heracles Ares.[3]

The amalgamated divine inhabitants of the Commagenian royal pantheon may be unique in the Roman Near East, but the notion of syncretism that these figures so brilliantly exemplify has been applied elsewhere in the wider region as well. If scholars have sometimes seen forms of 'syncretism' between all kinds of Near Eastern deities and Classical gods without too much factual basis, the formal, public bilingualism of Palmyra, with its many more or less matching inscriptions written in both Greek and Palmyrenean Aramaic, also provides real evidence for the actual equation of indigenous deities with Greek ones. Thus Fergus Millar, in his carefully formulated standard work on the Levantine lands, rightly refers to "the explicit syncretism of Greek and Semitic deities"[4] at the caravan city in the middle of the Syrian steppe, where Allat is rendered with Athena,[5] Elqonera (El the creator) with Poseidon,[6] Arsu with Ares,[7] and – most likely on account of the homophony of their names – Herta with Hera.[8] The Palmyrene phenomenon of an explicit juxtaposition of names coming from different divine worlds also raises questions as to the *limits* of syncretism, since there are simultaneously many cases in which the syncretism is incomplete, or indeed not even present. One bilingual inscription from AD 131 honours a local benefactor who had built a

[3] Facella, *La dinastia degli Orontidi* Fig. 37. Cf. G. Petzl, Antiochos I. von Kommagene im Handschlag mit den Göttern. Der Beitrag der neuen Reliefstele von Zeugma zum Verständnis der Dexioseis, in: G. Heedemann and E. Winter (eds.), *Neue Forschungen zur Religionsgeschichte Kleinasiens*, AMS 49 (Bonn 2003) 81-84.

[4] F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass. – London 1993) 319.

[5] H.J.W. Drijvers, Greek and Aramaic in Palmyrene inscriptions, in: M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield and M.P. Weitzman (eds.), *Studia Aramaica*, JSS Suppl. 4 (Oxford 1995) 31-42, at 34-38. Cf. T. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra*, Oriens et Occidens 4 (Stuttgart 2002) 62-63, 99-108.

[6] The identification has long been known from the bilingual inscription on an altar dated to AD 39, that was first published by J. Cantineau, Tadmorea (suite), *Syria* 19 (1938) 72-82, at 78-79 n° 31 (*l'lqwnr'* / Ποσειδῶνι). Cf. *PAT* 2779. A 'forgotten' altar that I discovered in the summer of 2011 in a storage room of the Cincinnati Art Museum, depicting among other Palmyrene divinities a figure holding a trident, will be published by L. Dirven and T. Kaizer, A Palmyrene altar in the Cincinnati Art Museum, *Syria* 90 (2013).

[7] D.R. Hillers and E. Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* (Baltimore – London 1996) n° 0197; Drijvers, Greek and Aramaic in Palmyrene inscriptions 34-38. Cf. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra* 60-63, 116-124.

[8] A. Bounni, *Le sanctuaire de Nabū à Palmyre. Texte*, BAH 131 (Beirut 2004) 61 n° 17.

temple – in the local Aramaic dialect – 'for Baal-Shamin and Durahlun', but simply 'for Zeus' in the Greek counterpart.[9] Typically Palmyrene deities such as Yarhibol, Aglibol and Malakbel always have their names transliterated in Greek (*Yarheibolos, Agleibolos, Malachbelos*), but there is also an instance of the exact opposite of the common local practice: the goddess Nemesis has her Greek name transliterated in Palmyrenean Aramaic (*nmsys*), both in an inscription from Wadi Arafa in the Palmyrene countryside and on a relief found in Dura-Europos.[10]

Over the years, many scholars have found it fashionable to avoid the term 'syncretism', chiefly because of its notorious implication of an arbitrary 'melting pot'. Indeed, if one accepts that all religions in the ancient world can be labelled as 'syncretistic' in the sense that they all contained at least some elements from different cultural backgrounds that came together, one must surely assent to the judgement that the expression loses its explanatory value. Han Drijvers argued that "the word assimilation would, in fact, be a better designation for the cultural process usually phrased as syncretism. A culture assimilates other elements to its own tradition and pattern, but does not mingle or mix everything together."[11] The advantage of Drijvers' formulation is that it seems to facilitate the development by which results of so-called syncretisms could over time stop to be regarded as syncretistic and instead be perceived as part of the (new) 'original package' of a culture's tradition to which further new elements could then be assimilated over time. However, a series of studies by anthropologists and social scientists in the first half of the 1990s emphasised the continuing value and validity of the notion of syncretism and has been instrumental in its restoration, by emphasising that the term should be considered particularly useful when discussing those aspects of a particular culture that themselves actually accentuate the procedure of borrowing and re-interpreting of divergent elements as part of its very nature.[12] In any case, a clear distinction ought to be made between unequivocal syncretism (either in the sense of truly composite deities as on Nemrud Dağ, or by means of bilingualism), embedded syncretism

[9] Hillers and Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* n° 0305. Cf. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra* 79-88.

[10] Wadi Arafa: Hillers and Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts* n° 1568. Dura-Europos: P.V.C. Baur and M.I. Rostovtzeff (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of First Season of Work, Spring 1928* (New Haven 1929) 62-64 pl. IV.1. For all references to the Palmyrene cult of Nemesis, see T. Kaizer, Nemesis, Aglibol and Malakbel: a note on a relief from Khirbet Ramadan in the Palmyrène, *Parthica* 3 (2001) 211-218.

[11] H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, ÉPRO 82 (Leiden 1980) 17-18.

[12] G. Aijmer (ed.), *Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols* (Göteborg, 1995); M. Pye, *Syncretism versus Synthesis* (Cardiff 1993); C. Stewart and R. Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (Abingdon, Oxon - New York, 1994).

(depicting a deity with a name from one cultural tradition with the requisites of a deity from another cultural tradition) and academic syncretism.

Fundamental to the whole discussion is the tension between local and supra-regional, or 'universal', aspects of religious life.[13] On the one hand, the religious cultures of the many cities, villages and sub-regions within the Roman Near East were above all very different from each other, and can only be fully appreciated through acknowledgement of their unique divine constellations and specifically local patterns of worship. On the other hand, the various places did not only share some of the same gods, rituals, or religious architecture, but also underwent similar processes through which local deities could be actively identified with those from elsewhere, be it gods of neighbouring settlements or of wholly distinct cultural spheres. The exchange between divine beings from different cultural and linguistic contexts is commonly labelled by modern scholars as *interpretatio*, not only *Romana* (as Tacitus formulated it in a famous phrase, *Germ.* 43.4) or *Graeca*, but also *indigena*.[14] But the notion of syncretism could also be applied in a more narrow, more specific sense, and one could be dealing with a "deliberate equation […] for theological or philosophical reasons",[15] as can be attested in a famous verse inscription set up at Hadrian's Wall, at the Roman fort at Carvoran (Magnis), by a military officer who is believed to have used his words of praise for the 'Heavenly Virgin' to exalt Julia Domna, Septimius Severus' Emesa-born empress: the goddess is likewise 'Mother of the gods, Peace, Virtue, Ceres, the Syrian Goddess, weighing life and laws in her balance; Syria has sent the constellation seen in the heavens to Libya to be worshipped.'[16] What follows is an exploration of the multifarious ways in which the divine inhabitants of the Roman Near East could undergo identification, and an attempt to answer

[13] I have discussed the methodological difficulties to integrate the local and universal aspects of Near Eastern religion in the Roman period in a series of articles published elsewhere: In search of Oriental cults: methodological problems concerning 'the particular' and 'the general' in Near Eastern religion in the Roman period, *Historia* 55 (2006) 26-47; Introduction, in T. Kaizer (ed.) *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, RGRW 164 (Leiden - Boston 2008) 1-36; Creating local religious identities in the Roman Near East, in: W. Adler (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Religions of the Classical World*, vol. II. *Religions of Classical Antiquity*, general editor M. Salzman (Cambridge forthcoming).

[14] Cf. M.A.R. Colledge, Interpretatio romana: the Semitic populations of Syria and Mesopotamia, in: M. Henig and A. King (eds.), *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1986), 221-230; G.F. Chiai, R. Häussler and C. Kunst (eds.), *Interpretatio. Religiöse Kommunikation zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung = Mediterraneo Antico* 14.1-2 (2012 forthcoming).

[15] J.B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA - Oxford - Carlton, Victoria 2007) 147.

[16] *RIB* 1791: *Imminet Leoni Virgo caeles ti situ | spicifera, iusti inventrix, urbium conditrix, | ex quis muneribus nosse contigit deos. | Ergo eadem mater divum, Pax, Virtus, Ceres, | Dea Syria, lance vitam et iura pensitans. | In caelo visum Syria sidus edidit | Libyae colendum; inde cuncti didicimus. | Ita intellexit numine inductus tuo | Marcus Caecilius Donatianus, militans | tribunus in praefecto dono principi*. Translation S. Ireland, *Roman Britian. A Sourcebook* (Abingdon, Oxon. - New York 2008) 194.

the questions of who *are* the gods and goddesses (or who *is* the deity) and of *how* one can tell who they are.

As has been shown above, in Commagene the solution seems straightforward: the god is what the *king* says he is. The deities that form part of the royal monuments on top of Nemrud Dağ and at Arsameia are not Zeus but Zeus Oromases, not Apollo or Helios but Apollo Mithras Helios Hermes, and not Heracles but Artagnes Heracles Ares. There is no doubt about this and it can be stated with certainty, simply because that is what the royal inscriptions record. Scholars may commonly emphasise that the overdramatic remnants of the dynastic cult of Commagene do not seem to tell us much about the area's indigenous religious culture,[17] but even if the inscribed sculptures proceeded from the religious and political programme of the royal house of Commagene and were in the first place related to the ideology of the house of the Orontids, they would still have needed to be sufficiently geared to the king's subjects in order to realise the latter's potential as adherents to the cults. That there was at least a degree of popular support for the dynasty is clear from Flavius Josephus' description (*Antiquities* 18.2.5 [53]) of how, following the death of Antiochus III in AD 17, the majority of the common people wished to continue 'the monarchical tradition of their ancestors'.[18] In the lands of Nabataea, the kingdom centred on the rock-cut city of Petra, another instance can be seen of royalty appropriating the divine. In a number of inscriptions the popular Nabataean deity Dusares is often labelled as 'god of our lord', i.e. of the Nabataean king, or as 'god of' a specific ruler.[19] But in contrast to what can be observed in Commagene, the epigraphic documents from the Nabataean world that provide information about Dusares' protective attitude towards the dynasty were not the result of a regal programme, but were commissioned and set up by the god's worshippers.

This leads to a second answer: the god is what the *worshipper* says he is. This is Millar's axiom, based above all on epigraphy.[20] According to that approach, inscriptions constantly form the basis of investigations, since they provide the opportunity to attend first

[17] Or, as Millar, *The Roman Near East* 452, stated about the region west of the Upper Euphrates: "nothing approaching an answer to questions about local culture is possible."

[18] In contrast to the upperclass: οἱ μὲν δυνατοὶ μεταβάλλειν τὸ σχῆμα τῆς πολιτείας εἰς ἐπαρχίαν ἀξιοῦντες, τὸ πλῆθος δὲ βασιλεύεσθαι κατὰ τὰ πάτρια. Translation LCL. Note the slightly different presentation of the situation in AD 17 by Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.42.5): *per idem tempus Antiocho Commagenorum, Philopatore Cilicum regibus defunctis turbabantur nations, plerisque Romanum, aliis regium imperium cupientibus* ('At around the same time, on the decease of Antiochus and Philopator, the kings respectively of the Commageni and Cilicians, there was disruption in their nations, the majority desiring Roman, others royal, command'. Translation A.J. Woodman (Indianapolis – Cambridge 2004)).

[19] E.g. the Turkmaniyyeh tomb inscription near Petra, *CIS* II 1.350: *dwšrʾ ʾlh mrʾnʾ*. Cf. T. Kaizer, Kings and gods. Some thoughts on religious patterns in Oriental principalities, in: id. and M. Facella (eds.), *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, Oriens et Occidens 19 (Stuttgart 2010) 113-124, at 118-121.

[20] Millar, *The Roman Near East* 248–249, 270.

and foremost to the names and epithets actually given to the deities by their worshippers. It is of course correct to say that 'the god is what the worshipper says he is' in the sense that most of our knowledge of the divine world of the Roman Near East depends on the inscribed altars, steles and columns which individual dedicants and benefactors paid for in honour of specific inhabitants of that divine world. But there is a complication to this argument: the ancient worshipper would certainly not have agreed with the idea that he had 'made up' or generated his own deity.[21] From his own perspective, he simply addressed his deity in such manner that seemed to fit the appropriate situation best, whether following priestly instruction, alleged ancestral convention or divine revelation. Thus, on a more theological level, it can be said that the inhabitants of the local divine worlds within the Near East were there perpetually and invariably, rather than being what their worshippers said they were. Depending both on the local context and on their own perspectives, worshippers could merely adjust the divine names, sometimes resulting in an approach to the gods that appears (at least to us) as bewildering. The attestation at the Euphrates small-town of Dura-Europos, for example, of a variety of cults of Zeus, all with different designations - Zeus Kyrios (identified with the Palmyrene version of Baal-Shamin), Zeus Theos, Zeus Megistos, Zeus Soter, Zeus Betylos[22] – could, in origin, have been linked to the religious desire to emphasise a specific quality of the god (or, in the latter case – Zeus Betylos as the ancestral god τῶν πρὸς τῷ Ὀρόντῃ, 'of those by the Orontes' – also a regional variety). Over time, however, the epithets may have grown so closely intertwined with the divine name that a number of distinct religious figures developed with their cult practices limited to, or at least mainly focused upon, separate places of worship. But more straightforwardly contradictory seems a dedication, set up in Aquileia in North Italy, to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus Heliopolitanus,[23] where the traditional Capitoline nomenclature of the leading god in the Roman state pantheon is combined not with one, but with two toponymic deities. That Jupiter Best and Greatest is both 'of Doliche' and 'of Heliopolis-Baalbek' is of course – logically - impossible, as labelling a deity as being 'of' a particular locality is in part to distinguish him from a similarly named god from another place.

[21] Ibid., 249, where Millar argues that "[the deity's] worshippers could literally make of him what they would."

[22] S.B. Downey, Zeus the Greatest in Syria, *Parthica* 6 (2004) 117-128.

[23] Cf. Millar, *Roman Near East* 249 n. 28.

Similar considerations and complications surround the issue of divine imagery: the god is how he is represented.[24] This may seem an even more slippery issue, because it is liable to interpretation (meaning interpretation in the ancient world itself). But there are more basic problems at the outset: *Who* decided how the god is represented? Was it the person (or agent) who paid for a statue, or did it depend on the inspiration of the artist? Was the sculptor (or painter, or mosaic floor layer) following a specific example from a pattern book? Was everybody simply supposed to know how the god looked like, or rather how he ought to be represented, in a certain situation? Should we reckon that everybody, or at least everybody within a specific (local?) context, could recognise and identify any odd religious image, or was it always a matter of different individuals seeing and concentrating on different aspects and therefore making different identifications? Only in a limited number of cases it can be said that divine imagery is subject to what may be called an 'orthodoxy of iconography'. Here again, the Baals of Doliche and of Heliopolis are the best examples, as nominally local Near Eastern deities who were depicted throughout the Roman empire strictly according to their 'canonical types' (although liable to a variable use of minor motifs and small details): IOMD standing on the back of a bull, bearded, wearing a kind of tiara and a girdled tunic, wielding an axe in his right hand - sometimes accompanied by his consort, Iuno Dolichena, who herself is standing on a cow, and holding a scepter and a mirror[25]; IOMH beardless, with curly hair, and usually crowned with *calathos*, standing on a plinth, flanked by bulls, and enclosed in a sort of sheath which is neatly divided in a number of sections displaying busts, holding a whip in his right hand, and an ear of corn in his left. Obviously, the more 'Classical' deities are supposed to be similarly recognizable by their 'standard iconography': Hermes with *caduceus*; Heracles with club and lion-skin; Apollo with lyre.

But when 'West' meets 'East', the situation often becomes muddled. For example, at Palmyra, the goddess Allat could be depicted both as seated between two lions, in the manner of the 'Syrian goddess' Atargatis and many other mother goddesses throughout the eastern

[24] A slightly different question, obviously of great relevance to the present theme, would be that of the relationship between statuary and divine: to what degree *is* the statue the god, and to what degree is it simply a statue *of* the god? Cf. P. Weddle, *Touching the Gods. Physical Interaction with Cult Statues in the Roman World* (PhD Durham 2010) esp. 23-39. Note the famous passage in *Sacred Discourses* where Aelius Aristides describes how Athena appeared to him looking exactly like her famous statue in the Parthenon: 'Soon afterwards, Athena appeared, complete with the aegis, the beauty, the height and in fact the whole form of the Athenian Athena of Pheidias' (Aristid., *Or.* 48.41: ἔπειτα οὐ πολὺ ὕστερον ἡ Ἀθηνᾶ φαίνεται τήν τε αἰγίδα ἔχουσα καὶ τὸ κάλλος καὶ τὸ μέγεθος καὶ σύμπαν δὴ σχῆμα οἵαπερ ἡ Ἀθήνησιν ἡ Φειδίου). Translation M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome. Volume 2. A Sourcebook* (Cambridge 1998) 232-233 n° 9.5c.

[25] As e.g. on a relief recently unearthed at ancient Dülük itself. See M. Blömer, Die Stele von Doliche, in: E. Winter (ed.), *Von Kummuḫ nach Telouch: historische und archäologische Untersuchungen in Kommagene. Dolichener und Kommagenische Forschungen* IV, Asia Minor Studien 65 (Bonn 2011) 69-103 Taf. 19.

half of the Roman empire, and as standing with Athena's armour (helmet, shield, spear and *aegis*), though neither representing a single 'type'.[26] In addition, an early Greek inscription from Palmyra is dedicated 'to Allat who is Artemis',[27] suggesting that the indigenous goddess shared characteristics not only with Atargatis and Athena, but also with a goddess who more commonly was identified with the Mesopotamian Nanaia, both at Palmyra and elsewhere in the Near East. At Hatra, the widespread figure with club and lion-skin, never epigraphically identified as Heracles (but sometimes adorned with a specifically local necklace[28]), is commonly taken to have been equated with Nergal, especially on the grounds of an inscribed statue base reading *nrgwl klbʾ*, 'Nergal, the dog' (or, 'the axe') showing the possible remains of a figure leaning on his club.[29] But Nergal is also alleged by scholars to appear as the main figure on the so-called 'Cerberus relief', a long-haired and bearded figure, with horns and an eagle on his forehead and dressed in Oriental clothes with trousers, holding a sword in his left hand and an axe in his right one.[30] If it is correct (though it is debatable as far as I am concerned) that at Hatra both the Heracles figure and the central image on the 'Cerberus relief' should be identified with Nergal, than the latter had both an 'indigenous' appearance and a 'Classical' version, similar to the coexistence of Western and Eastern types of Apollo-Nebu, as is stated in *On the Syrian Goddess*, the treatise on the cult of Atargatis at Hierapolis written in the style of Herodotus. Here, Lucian touches on precisely this point of a representation of a divine image that, at least from the western point of view, is fully unanticipated: 'Beyond this throne there is a statue of Apollo, but not as he is usually depicted. Everyone else thinks of Apollo as young and represents him in early manhood, yet these people alone display a statue of Apollo bearded. They think well of themselves for doing this, and find fault with the Greeks and others who worship Apollo supposing him to

[26] H.J.W. Drijvers, *De matre inter leones sedente*. Iconography and character of the Arab goddess Allât, in: M.B. de Boer and T.A. Edridge (eds.), *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* I (Leiden 1979) 331-351; V. Christides, Religious syncretism in the Near East: Allāt-Athena in Palmyra, *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 1 (2003), 65-81; E.A. Friedland, Visualizing deities in the Roman Near East: aspects of Athena and Athena-Allat, in: Y.Z. Eliav, E.A. Friedland and S. Herbert (eds.), *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East. Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power*, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 9 (Leuven – Dudley, Mass. 2008) 315-350.

[27] Drijvers, *De matre inter leones sedente* 340 with pl. LXXV.

[28] S. Downey, The jewelry of Hercules at Hatra, *AJA* 72 (1968) 211-217; ead., The jewelry of Hercules at Hatra, addendum, *AJA* 76 (1972) 77-78. Cf. H. Stierlin, *Cités du désert – Pétra, Palmyra, Hatra* (Fribourg 1987) pl. 191.

[29] W.I. al-Salihi, Hercules-Nergal at Hatra, *Iraq* 33 (1971) 113-115 pl.34d. For a more sceptical approach, see T. Kaizer, The 'Heracles figure' at Hatra and Palmyra: problems of interpretation, *Iraq* 62 (2000) 219-232; id., Further remarks on the 'Heracles figure' at Hatra and Palmyra, in: S.G. Vashalomidze and L. Greisiger (eds.), *Der Christliche Orient und seine Umwelt: Gesammelte Studien zu Ehren Jürgen Tubachs anläßlich seines 60. Geburtstags*, Studies in Oriental Religions 56 (Wiesbaden 2007) 37-48, at 41-42 for the alternative reading of the epithet.

[30] V. Christides, Heracles-Nergal in Hatra, *Berytus* 30 (1982) 105-115. Cf. Stierlin, *Cités du désert* pl. 188.

be a boy. This is the reason. They think it great unwisdom to make images of the gods imperfect, for they consider that childhood is still imperfection. They innovate in their notion of Apollo in one more respect: they alone clothe him.'[31]

It can in any case be assumed that certain divine representations could become more prominent than others for non-theological reasons, especially in a public context. In the same way that a benefactor who financed the construction of a temple (or of a substantial part of it) could have a say in the matter of whom that temple would be dedicated to (as in the case of the dedication in AD 32 of the great temple at Palmyra 'to Bel and Yarhibol and Aglibol'[32]), by paying for a relief, a sculpture or a fresco to be set up or painted in a sanctuary, its dedicant was able to impose his own vision of the divine upon the community of worshippers as a whole. In a similar vein, most of the benefactors responsible for the splendid religious buildings, monuments and artefacts from the region would have belonged to the local elites responsible for the issuing of the coinage of the cities throughout the Near East: in the world of numismatics, the god is what the *polis* decides him to be. Or rather, the *polis* (i.e. its upper class representatives) decides *which* gods are relevant on the communal level in the first place. From this perspective coins are more relevant than individual dedications, since they were not the result of the piety of an individual or a family, but were issued by the city as a collectivity. The religious imagery on the reverse of the so-called Roman provincial coinage was therefore, in principle, revered by the whole body of citizens of the locality that struck them. However, the evidence for gods, temples, myths and rites, as it appears on the obverse of the locally produced coins, does not provide a complete and impartial view of the religious life of the respective city. Instead it presents a mere civic façade of religious life, reflecting the religious preferences of the city as a whole as they were settled on by the local elite, members of which would have acted as the magistrates in charge of the monetary system. For example in the Decapolis, following the common pattern whereby a city's coinage is literally

[31] Lucian, *Syr. D.* 35: μετὰ δὲ τὸν θρόνον τοῦτον κέαται ξόανον Ἀπόλλωνος, οὐκ οἷον ἐώθεε ποιέεσθαι· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοι πάντες Ἀπόλλωνα νέον τε ἥγηνται καὶ πρωθήβην ποιέουσιν, μοῦνοι δὲ οὗτοι Ἀπόλλωνος γενειήτεω ξόαναν δεικνύουσιν. καὶ τάδε ποιέοντες ἑωυτοὺς μὲν ἐπαινέουσιν, Ἑλλήνων δὲ κατηγορέουσιν καὶ ἄλλων ὁκόσοι Ἀπόλλωνα παῖδα θέμενοι ἱλάσκονται. αἰτίη δὲ ἥδε· δοκέει αὐτέοισιν ἀσοφίη μεγάλη ἔμμεναι ἀτελέα ποιέεσθαι τοῖσι θεοῖσι τὰ εἴδεα, τὸ δὲ νέον ἀτελὲς ἔτι νομίζουσιν. ἓν δὲ καὶ ἄλλο τῷ σφετέρῳ Ἀπόλλωνι καινουργέουσιν· μοῦνοι Ἀπόλλωνα εἵμασι κοσμέουσιν. Translation J.L. Lightfoot, *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess. Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford 2003). Ibid. 456-469 for further discussion. Cf. A. Kropp, The iconography of Nabu at Hatra in the context of Syrian cult images, in: L. Dirven (ed.), *Hatra. Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome*, Oriens et Occidens (Stuttgart forthcoming).

[32] Thus T. Kaizer, Reflections on the dedication of the temple of Bel at Palmyra in AD 32, in: L. de Blois, P. Funke and J. Hahn (eds.), *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religion: Ritual and Religious Life in the Roman Empire. Proceedings of the Fifth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire* (Leiden – Boston 2006) 95-105.

that ‘of’ the citizens of that *polis*, formulated in the genitive plural of the respective ethnicon, in Gerasa Artemis became the ‘Tyche of the Gerasenoi’ (seemingly in competition with a more ‘Greek Tyche’, who appeared with the legend ‘Antioch by the Chrysorhoas, the former Gerasa’)[33], whereas at Adraa coin legends referred to ‘Dousares, god of the Adraenoi’ (with the deity represented by a conical stone on a platform).[34]

If the coins of a *polis* present an artificial, and in any case a one-sided, façade identifying the deity as that of the civic collectivity, a more authoritative voice may perhaps be recognised in that of the god himself: the god is what he himself says he is. When Moses asked Yahweh, who addressed him from the burning bush on Mount Horeb, how he should introduce him to the Israelites in case they asked after his name, the famous reply was as follows: ‘I am that I am.’ A second time he spoke to Moses with these words: ‘I am the Lord. And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name **יהוה** [the tetragrammaton traditionally read as *adonai*, ‘my Lord’] was I not known to them.’[35] Within the world of the ‘Oriental cults’, the best known example is that of the Isis aretalogies, the ‘hymns of praise’ of which the most famous one comes from Kyme. The long text, of which only a few lines are quoted below, is written in the first person singular: ‘I am Isis the tyrant of the whole land. … I am the eldest daughter of Kronos. I am the wife and sister of king Osiris. … I am the mother of king Horus. I am she who rises in the Dog Star. I am she who is called God by women. … I divided earth from heaven. I appointed the paths of the stars. … I am mistress of rivers, winds and sea. … I am mistress of war. I am mistress of the thunderbolt.’ The goddess then adds the finishing touch with the exhortation ‘I conquered fate. To me fate listens. Hail Egypt who nourished me.’[36] This very public proclamation of divine virtues by the deity itself was, as the actual document on the west-coast of Asia Minor tells us, ‘copied from the inscription in Memphis which is positioned in

[33] A. Lichtenberger, Artemis and Zeus Olympios in Roman Gerasa and Seleucid religious policy, in: T. Kaizer (ed.), *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, RGRW 164 (Leiden – Boston 2008) 133-153, esp. 141-143.

[34] A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, ed. M. Piccirillo (Jerusalem 1978) 60-61 n° 1-3.

[35] *Exodus* 3:14: וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדָּי וּשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נוֹדַעְתִּי לָהֶם אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה; and 6:2-3: אֶנִי יְהוָה: וָאֵרָא אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק, respectively. Translation King James Version of 1769.

[36] Y. Grandjean, *Une nouvelle arétalogie d’Isis à Maronée*, ÉPRO 49 (Leiden 1975), App. III: Εἶσις ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ τύραννος πάσης χώρας ... Ἐγώ εἰμι Κρόνου θυγάτηρ πρεσβυτάτη. Ἐγώ εἰμι γυνὴ καὶ ἀδελφὴ Ὀσείριδος βασιλέως ... Ἐγώ εἰμι μήτηρ Ὥρου βασιλέως. Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἐν τῷ τοῦ κυνὸς ἄστρωι ἐπιτέλλουσα. Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ παρὰ γυναιξὶ θεὸς καλουμένη ... Ἐγὼ ἐχώρισα γῆν ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ. Ἐγὼ ἄστρων ὁδοὺς ἔδειξα ... Ἐγὼ ποταμῶν καὶ ἀνέμων καὶ θαλάσσης εἰμὶ κυρία ... Ἐγώ εἰμι πολέμου κυρία. Ἐγὼ κεραυνοῦ κυρία εἰμί ... Ἐγὼ τὸ ἱμαρμένον νικῶ. Ἐμοῦ τὸ εἱμαρμένον ἀκούει. Χαῖρε Αἴγυπτε θρέψασά με. Translation Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome 2. A Sourcebook* 297 n° 12.4a.

front of the temple of Hephaistos' (τάδε ἐγράφηι ἐκ τῆς στήλης τῆς ἐν Μέμφει ἥτις ἕστηκεν πρὸς τῷ Ἡφαιστιήωι). The fact that the Kyme aretalogy itself was written in Greek has of course raised questions as to which language was used for the 'original' in Memphis, and as to what degree the text reflected indigenous Egyptian religion, and it has often been observed that Isis' idiosyncratic self-identification removes us from the familiar world of traditional polytheism.[37] Her explicitly 'multiple' personality was in any case recognised by her common epithet μυριώνυμος, 'she of countless names', attested in many inscriptions (not only in Greek, but also transliterated in Latin) and indeed in Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* 53 (*Mor.* 372E),[38] and is of course also reflected in the goddess' revelation to Lucius, the protagonist in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*: 'Behold, Lucius, moved by your prayers I have come, I the mother of the universe, mistress of all the elements. … In one place the Phrygians, first-born of men, call me Pessinuntine Mother of the Gods, in another the autochthonous people of Attica calle me Cecropian Minerva, in another the sea-washed Cyprians call me Paphian Venus; to the arrow-bearing Cretans I am Dictynna Diana, to the trilingual Sicilians Ortygian Proserpina, to the ancient people of Eleusis Attic Ceres; some call me Juno, some Bellona, others Hecate, and still others Rhamnusia; the people of the two Ethiopias, who are lighted by the first rays of the Sun-God as he rises every day, and the Egyptians, who are strong in ancient lore, worship me with the rites that are truly mine and call me by my real name, which is Queen Isis.'[39]

This last example raises the question of which element needs to be prioritised, that the goddess is identifying herself, or that this divine self-identification has reached us as part of a literary work, produced by an author with his own agenda. Because regardless of whether the author is a novelist, historian or satirist, the god is also what the skilled literary writer says he is. This notion is particularly pertinent since two of the three literary texts from the Roman Near East itself that contain, or rather claim to contain, an insider's account of the traditional

[37] For discussion, see above all H.S. Versnel, *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three Studies in Henotheism, Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* I, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 6 (Leiden – New York – Kopenhagen – Cologne 1990) 39-52.

[38] Cf. L. Bricault, Isis myrionyme, in: C. Berger, G. Clerc et N. Grimal (eds.), *Hommages à Jean Leclant* III: *Études isiaques*, Bibliothèque d'Études 106 (Cairo 1994) 67-86; id., *Myrionymi. Les épiclèses grecques et latines d'Isis, de Sarapis et d'Anubis*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 82 (Stuttgart 1996).

[39] Apul, *Met.* 11.5: *En adsum tuis commota, Luci, precibus, rerum naturae parens, elementorum omnium domina, saeculorum progenies initialis, summa numinum, regina manium, prima caelitum, deorum dearumque facies uniformis, quae caeli luminosa culmina, maris salubria flamina, inferum deplorata silentia nutibus meis dispense; cuius numen unicum multiformi specie, ritu vario, nomine multiiugo totus veneratur orbis. Inde primigenii Phryges Pessinuntiam deum matrem, hinc autocthones Attici Cecropeiam Minervam, illinc fluctuantes Cyprii Paphiam Venerem, Cretes sagittiferi Dictynnam Dianam, Siculi trilingues Stygiam Proserpinam, Eleusinii vetusti Actaeam Cererem, Iunonem alii, Bellonam alii, Hecatam isti, Rhamnusiam illi, et qui nascentis dei Solis incohantibus illustrantur radiis Aethiopes utrique priscaque doctrina pollentes Aegyptii, caerimoniis me propriis percolentes, appellant vero nomine reginam Isidem*. Translation LCL.

polytheistic cults in the region, identify the divine according to a method that scholars label 'euhemeristic', after the early-Hellenistic philosopher Euhemerus of Messene, according to whom the gods were originally mortal rulers who had been deified by their people in acknowledgement of their services to mankind. Both the *Phoenician History* by Philo of Byblos, which falsely claims to be a translation of a Phoenician work written by one Sanchuniathon before the Trojan war, and the enigmatic Syriac text known as the *Oration of Meliton the Philosopher* portray the inhabitants of the local divine worlds as having originally been human.[40] The third of the literary texts alluded to is the one that has evoked most discussion, the above-mentioned *On the Syrian Goddess*, attributed to Lucian of Samosata. In this case, however, the god is *not* what the author says he is. Or to be more precise: the author teasingly identifies the goddess of Hierapolis by all kind of names apart from her actual name, Atargatis, which – as Strabo (*Geogr.* 16.1.27) and Pliny (*HN* 5.19/81) make clear – was widely known. The goddess' cult statue is described as follows: 'Certainly, the image of Zeus looks entirely like Zeus in features and clothes and seated posture; you could not identify it otherwise even if you wished. But when you examine Hera, her image appears to be of many forms. While the overall effect is certainly that of Hera, she also has something of Athena and Aphrodite and Selene and Rhea and Artemis and Nemesis and the Fates. In one hand she has a sceptre, in the other a spindle, and on her head she wears rays, a tower, and the *kestos* with which they adorn Ourania alone.'[41]

Lucian's literary device has, probably unintentionally, been followed by modern scholars: the god has become what the academic says he is. Unidentified divine figures are often characterised through recognition of iconographic features and requisites that relate to a host of other deities. A case in point is an unpublished statue in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, labelled as a 'syncretistic, Syrian military deity', and described in the acquisition

[40] Philo of Byblos: A.I. Baumgarten, *The* Phoenician History *of Philo of Byblos. A Commentary*, ÉPRO 99 (Leiden 1981); A. Kaldellis and C. López Ruiz, Philon (790), in: I. Worthinton, *Brill's New Jacoby* (Brill Online). Cf. C. Bonnet, *Errata, absurditates, deliria et hallucinations*. Le cheminement de la critique historique face à la mythologie phénicienne de Philon de Byblos: un cas problématique et exemplaire de *testis unus*, *Anabases* 11 (2010) 123-136. Meliton: J.L. Lightfoot, The *Apology* of Pseudo-Meliton, *SEL* 24 (2007) 59–110; ead., Pseudo-Meliton and the cults of the Roman Near East, in: C. Bonnet, V. Pirenne-Delforge and D. Praet (eds.), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: cent ans après Cumont (1906-2006). Bilan historique et historiographique* (Brussels – Rome 2009) 387-399.

[41] Lucian, *Syr. D.* 32: Καὶ δῆτα τὸ μὲν τοῦ Διὸς ἄγαλμα ἐς Δία πάντα ὁρῇ καὶ κεφαλὴν καὶ εἵματα καὶ ἕδρην, καί μιν οὐδὲ ἐθέλων ἄλλως εἰκάσεις. ἡ δὲ Ἥρη σκοπέοντί τοι πολυειδέα μορφὴν ἐκφανέει· καὶ τὰ μὲν ξύμπαντα ἀτρεκέϊ λόγῳ Ἥρη ἐστίν, ἔχει δέ τι καὶ Ἀθηναίης καὶ Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Σεληναίης καὶ Ῥέης καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος καὶ Νεμέσιος καὶ Μοιρέων. χειρὶ δὲ τῇ μὲν ἑτέρῃ σκῆπτρον ἔχει, τῇ ἑτέρῃ δὲ ἄτρακτον, καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ ἀκτῖνάς τε φορέει καὶ πύργον καὶ κεστὸν τῷ μούνην τὴν Οὐρανίαν κοσμέουσιν. Translation Lightfoot, *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess*. Ibid. 434-446 for further discussion. Cf. J. Elsner, Describing self in the language of the other: pseudo (?) Lucian at the temple of Hierapolis, in: S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge 2001) 123-153.

report of 1979 by the then Keeper of Antiquities by reference to various ancient goddesses.[42] It is precisely the unprecedented combination of a particular set of well-known iconographic features which can turn an otherwise unidentified image into an unparalleled divine figure.

So, what or who is the god? All of the above? Only part of the above? Even more than the above?[43] Religious life in the Roman Near East can only be approached properly by a full appreciation of the interplay between local and universal (or in any case supra-regional) tendencies. Any local religion will have been made up of various aspects that themselves were not necessarily 'local', but that can only be interpreted aptly within the context in which they eventually came to function. A whole series of mechanisms were employed to identify gods and goddesses first and foremost as local, even if their names were known from elsewhere and they shared attributes and cult patterns with deities known across the ancient world.[44] Above all, toponymic deities, gods and goddesses who were explicitly named after a specific locality, illuminate the way in which the inhabitants of the Roman Near East applied explicit labels of cultural identification to their gods and hence conceived themselves. This could be linked to a major city, as with Zeus *Damaskènos*, or to a little village in the middle of the Jebel Ansariyah, as with Zeus *Baitokèkè*. In the case of Atargatis of Manbug, the holy city in north Syria, a Greek inscription on four sides of an altar from Kafr Hawar on Mount Hermon specifies her as the Syrian goddess *of* the Hierapolitoi: the dedication (Θεᾷ Συρίᾳ Ἱερα [π]ολιτῶν) is made by a certain Lucius, who first identifies himself as the goddess'

[42] This 'forgotten' statue has been discussed at length and is illustrated in Kaizer, Creating local religious identities in the Roman Near East.

[43] I am of course well aware that my discussion of possible 'answers' to the question is far from exhaustive. Others that could have joined the list include: the god is what the philosopher says he is; the god is a cosmological or astrological symbol (an approach perhaps taken to the extreme by some of the interpreters of the Mithraic tauroctony as a 'star map', esp. D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* (Oxford 1991), with the important review article by N.M. Swerdlow, On the cosmical mysteries of Mithras, *CPh* 86 (1991) 48-63); the god is what the oracle says he is (not too dissimilar from the above-mentioned 'the god is what the god himself says he is', but technically different in that the information is explicitly said to have come through an oracle, as in the famous six hexameter verses from Oenoanda in northern Lycia that also found their way into the work of Lactantius, the fifth-century *Theosophy of Tübingen*, and Malalas. Cf. S. Mitchell, The cult of Theos Hypsistos between pagans, jews, and christians, in: P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1999) 81-148, esp. 81-92); the god is what the maxim says he is, as in the first line of a Greek apothegm often brought to bear on discussions of emperor worship: τί θεός; τὸ κρατοῦν· τί βασιλεύς; ἰσόθεος ('What is a god? The exercise of power. What is a king? God-like.' Cf. S.R.F. Price, Gods and emperors: the Greek language of the Roman imperial cult, *JHS* 104 (1984) 79-95, at 95); and the god is what the hymn or acclamation says he is (with hymns *explaining why* the god is great, and acclamations *confirming that* he is great; cf. A. Chaniotis, Acclamations as a form of religious communication, in: H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Die Religion des Imperium Romanum. Koine und Konfrontationen* (Tübingen 2008) 199-218; M.E. Gordley, *Teaching through Song in Antiquity. Didactic Hymnody among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians* (Tübingen 2011)).

[44] What follows will of course be barely scraping the surface, but it ought to be sufficient to illustrate the recognition of locality by the population of the Roman Near East itself. For further discussion (itself anything but comprehensive), see the earlier mentioned Kaizer, Creating local religious identities in the Roman Near East.

δοῦλος, and then goes on to describe himself as εὐσεβὴς καὶ πεμφθεὶς ὑπὸ τῆς κυρίας Ἀταργάτη[ς].[45] A similar specification is perhaps attested in the Nabataean realm, where an Aramaic inscription from Wadi es-Siyyagh at Petra seems to refer to *ʾtrʿtʾ mnbgytʾ* ('Atarate Manbigitess').[46] This would confirm the status of her major cult centre at Hierapolis-Manbug as described by Lucian, who, as we have seen, does *not* actually name the goddess as Atargatis. However, one cannot be sure that *all* appearances of a goddess called Atargatis are therefore necessarily to be linked with the one at Hierapolis.[47]

Further recognition of locality is apparent with the widespread cult of Tyche (or Gad in Aramaic), the local city protectress with *corona muralis*, sometimes depicted with a *cornucopia* and often seated, following Eutychides' sculpture of the Tyche of Antioch, with her feet resting on the representation of the local source of water.[48] But here, too, the tension is palpable: in order to emphasise the divine power looking after a specific city, that city would turn to an image it shared with all other cities! In some cases, however, a Tyche would be recognizable by a particular 'local' requisite. The Tyche of Hippos in the Decapolis, whose indigenous name Sussita had a similar meaning, could be accompanied by a horse (only later turning into Pegasus),[49] at Carrhae-Harran, famous for its ancient temple of the

[45] J. Aliquot, *IGLS* 11, *Mont Hermon (Liban et Syrie)*, BAH 183 (Beirut 2008) 78-80 n°45. Cf. J.L. Lightfoot, Μαμβογαῖος, *EA* 33 (2001) 113-118; J. Aliquot, *La vie religieuse au Liban sous l'empire romain*, BAH 189 (Beirut 2009) 146-147.

[46] *CIS* II 422; P.J. Alpass, *The Religious Life of Nabataea* (PhD Durham 2011) 136-137 n°23. Cf. J.F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans. A Conspectus*, RGRW 136 (Leiden – Boston – Cologne 2001) 141: "The word may refer rather to a devotee of Atargatis, but in any case the implication would be of a connection with the Atargatis cult."

[47] There is no evidence, e.g. to support an identification of the Atargatis attested at Palmyra (as one of the main deities 'of the four civic tribes' of the city) or at Hatra as the Syrian goddess from Hierapolis. Cf. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra* 153-154; id., Some remarks about the religious life of Hatra, *Topoi* 10 (2000) 229-252, at 240-241. The famous little relief found in the temple of Atargatis at Dura-Europos is generally taken to be the best illustration of Lucian's description of the cult statues in the temple in Hierapolis. Cf. P.V.C. Baur, M.I. Rostovtzeff and A.R. Bellinger (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Preliminary Report of Third Season of Work, November 1929 - March 1930* (New Haven 1932) 100-107 pl. XIV. Millar, *Roman Near East*, labelled it, on the cover, as "a relief from Dura-Europos, representing the 'Syrian goddess' Atargatis of Hierapolis", and Lightfoot, *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess*, similarly chose it as the cover of her major commentary on Lucian's treatise. Technically speaking, however, the relief is of Atargatis 'of Dura-Europos', as no evidence has come to light to show a wilful acknowledgement on the part of the goddess' worshippers at the Euphrates stronghold of a link with the famous temple in northern Syria.

[48] S.B. Matheson, with contributions by J.J. Pollitt e.a., *An Obsession with Fortune. Tyche in Greek and Roman Art*, YUAG Bulletin 1994 (New Haven 1994), with fig. 1 for an illustration of the famous Roman copy after Eutychides' original statue. Cf. N. Belayche, Tychè et la *Tychè* dans les cites de la Palestine romaine, *Syria* 80 (2003) 111-138.

[49] Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis* 170-179; A. Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis. Untersuchungen zu numismatischen, archaölogischen und epigraphischen Zeugnissen*, ADPV 29 (Wiesbaden 2003) 30-31; For some recent finds, see A. Segal e.a., *Hippos-Sussita. Tenth Season of Excavations (July and September 2009)* (Haifa 2009) 158 n° 13, 17 with pl. I-II.

Moon cult, the Tyche could be depicted with a crescent,[50] and at Nysa-Scythopolis, again of the Decapolis, Dionysus' wet-nurse Nysa became the city's Tyche while accepting the divine child from Zeus and then cradling it.[51] As for the local sources of water themselves, each river and spring would have its own personification, appreciated by the local population, as Hesiod already understood when he wrote in his *Theogony* when referring to the thousands of sons and daughters Tethys bore to Ocean, 'who are widely dispersed and hold fast to the earth and the depths of the waters, everywhere in the same way … the names of them all it is difficult for a mortal man to tell, but each of those who dwell around them knows them.'[52] But, as Franz Cumont warned long ago, religious attitudes to rivers cannot be solely explained with reference to Greek influences, even if the *visual* evidence from the Roman period shows Classical reclining figures in typically river-god style: "Gli Assiro-Babilonesi, che traevano presagi da tutti i fenomeni naturali, non hanno mancato di osservare anche i fiumi per cercarvi pronostici favorevoli o funesti."[53] In this context, the interplay between West and East is intriguingly present on a mosaic, unfortunately not longer accessible, from El Mas 'Udiye in Syria:[54] on what may count as the most Classical of art forms, the reclining river god is identified as 'king river Euphrates' not only in Greek (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΠΟΤΑΜΟΣ ΕΥΦΡΑΤΗΣ), but also in Syriac (*prt mlk*). If a worshipper was unsure as to how to identify a local deity, he could of course always adhere to a time-honoured, conventional Graeco-Roman method to 'play safe': when in AD 258 the Palmyrene traveller Abgar had reached a cave on the island of Suqutra in the Indian Ocean, he simply asked for a blessing of 'the god who resides here' (*ʾlhʾ dy šrn tnn*) when setting up his wooden tablet against a stalagmite.[55]

Identifying the divine ought not to commence with the assumption of identifications made on a supra-regional or universal level, and instead the starting point ought to be a recognition and an appreciation of the multifarious approaches, techniques and procedures applied in the ancient world itself, and hence a contextualization of the available evidence on

[50] G.F. Hill, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia. A Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum* (London 1922) 83 n° 6 with pl. XII.7, 89 n° 57 with pl. XIII.2

[51] Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis* 194-195 n° 23 and 198-199 n° 32; Lichtenberger, *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis* 136-141; R. Barkay, *The Coinage of Nysa-Scythopolis (Beth-Shean)* (Jerusalem, 2003) esp. 123-124.

[52] Hes., *Theog.* 365-370: αἵ ῥα πολυσπερέες γαῖαν καὶ βένθεα λίμνης πάντῃ ὁμῶς ἐφέπουσι ... τῶν ὄνομ' ἀργαλέον πάντων βροτὸν ἄνδρα ἐνισπεῖν, οἱ δὲ ἕκαστοι ἴσασιν, ὅσοι περιναιετάουσι. Translation LCL.

[53] F. Cumont, Il culto dell'Eufrate nell'epoca romana, *Rivista di scienza delle religioni* 1 (1916) 93-99, at 95; id., *Études syriennes* (Paris 1917) 251.

[54] Cumont, *Études syriennes* 250. Cf. J. Balty, Artiste ou commanditaire? La mosaïque de Mas'udiye, in: M. Fano Santi (ed.), *Studi di archeologia in onore di Gustavo Traversari* (Rome 2004) 11-15; M.-H. Quet, L'Euphrate-roi de la mosaïque d'El Mas 'Udiyé (Syrie), in: H. Morlier (ed.), *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* IX.2, CÉFR 352 (Rome 2005) 1317-1323.

[55] C.J. Robin and M. Gorea, Les vestiges antiques de la grotte de Ḥôq (Suquṭra, Yémen), *CRAI* (2002) 409-445, at 432-445; T. Kaizer, Religious mentality in Palmyrene documents, *Klio* 86 (2004) 165-184, at p.171-172.

the local level. With sometimes bewildering divine identifications and interpretations cropping up in the evidence, acceptance of the fact that it is simply impossible to make all that evidence fit within one logical, harmonious religious system is our only chance to be 'coping with the gods' (which is the title of Henk Versnel's long-awaited Sather Lectures).[56] From at least that perspective, all that can therefore be happily done is to continue producing further 'études préliminaires'.

[56] H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods. Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, RGRW 173 (Leiden – Boston 2011). A week before the conference in Toulouse, Versnel's book was presented by Brill in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden as the most recent volume of *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, on the occasion of his retirement as managing editor of the series. Cf. my review in *Mythos. Rivista di storia delle religioni* (forthcoming).